

The Briefing



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Designer Cells

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Darwin's Black Box:

The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution

Michael J. Behe

The Free Press, New York, 1996.

For a Science book to win the *Christianity Today* 'Best Christian Book of the Year' is somewhat surprising. Despite the chatty style and simple analogies, this is a book with technical biochemical descriptions of some difficulty. What relevance has this to Christianity? In scientific detail, probably not much. The relevance is in the implications of the thesis, particularly in the highly creationist-sensitive American context. Behe claims he has found a fatal flaw in Darwinian evolution—that because of discoveries in microbiology, Darwinian evolution simply cannot be true.

The centre of Behe's argument is that the cell is too complex to have evolved. Such arguments are common; the eye has been the favourite example for decades, as an example of something that could not have developed gradually. Evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins have responded with conjectures as to how an eye might have developed, and nothing is settled. Behe, however, is arguing on a rather more technical level. With detailed descriptions of the functioning of the cell, he says that there are far too many interdependent systems for them to have developed gradually.

The analogy is the mousetrap. If any part of a mousetrap is missing, then the whole thing cannot function. A mousetrap without a spring is not a less efficient mousetrap, it is not a mousetrap at all. A cell is conceptually like this, Behe

argues, though on a much more complicated level. Something like the cell comes into being all together, or not at all. There is no path of possible development by which small changes could have eventually added up to the final complexity.

The answer might be, then, that it's just that no one has thought of the path of development yet. Perhaps it did evolve, we just don't know how. Behe acknowledges this response, but answers with a survey of publications on the evolution of the cell—there aren't any. After over a century of evolutionary theory, and decades of biochemical research, no one has presented a theory in detail of how a cell might have come to be. This is an argument from silence, of course, but Behe has a strong point: if evolution is so obvious, so basic, as the biological community holds, why is it that *no one* can explain how the cell might have evolved?

Before reading this book, I was rather sceptical about the wisdom of this line of argument. Aren't we just heading for another God of the Gaps? So evolution cannot explain the cell—but what if 50 years later some other naturalistic theory does? Christians are risking public humiliation again if we use this scientific argument against evolution as an argument for God. We may be able to show that there is a gap at the moment, but that gap might disappear in time just as others have.

However Behe is not arguing that. His main conclusion is that the cell looks like something intelligently designed. He does not claim that science therefore proves God, although as a Catholic he believes that God is the designer. Rather, he challenges the scientific community that this conclusion is rejected because of a bias *against* God. He is not, he claims, bringing his theistic presuppositions to skew his scientific discoveries; on the contrary, the atheistic presuppositions of the accepted view of science are causing scientists to ignore crucial evidence.

Responses to this book seem to demonstrate Behe was right. In reviews of the book by various scientists, an insulting and derogatory tone seems to be more common than discussion of the science. While criticisms have been made of various particular examples used by Behe, reviews have also shown furious and passionate denunciation of Behe's daring to challenge evolution. "Michael Behe [and others] have pulled off a remarkable feat", writes evolutionary biologist H. Allen Orr. "They've made squabbling over creationism seem almost intellectually respectable" (*Boston Review*, 1997).

Whether Behe is right or not about the cell is not for me to say. Regardless of that, he seems to be right in his evaluation of the philosophy of evolution. It would be most ironic if, as biologist Lynn Margulis (quoted by Behe) predicts, history judges neo-Darwinism as "a minor twentieth-century religious sect within the sprawling religious persuasion of Anglo-Saxon biology" (p. 26).